

BREAKING THE THIRD WALL

HOW DO ARCHITECTURE AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT INFORM OUR IDENTITY

Research Paper for **utopia vs. the city**
P+ARG Biennial Conference 2020
University of Michigan
January 31st – February 1st

Submitted by:

Meesh Zucker
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Seantel Trombly
Wentworth Institute of Technology

January 24th, 2020

ABSTRACT

We, two queer identified designers, aim to tackle the classic conundrum of what came first the chicken or egg. Or rather in this case: the architect, the design, the environment, or it's people. Our paper will explore architecture and the built environment's role in the construction of gender and how that performance can limit the representation and exploration of diverse identities.

There are two parts to this story: the development of a place by the designer and the reality of that construction's affect onto those outside of their intended audience. The design of anything, whether it be utopia, architecture, or art is inherently a reflection of its creator and how they see the world to be. The following paper aims to shine a light on the implicit bias imposed into the design of our homes and cities and therefore how we understand ourselves in relation to this form of art. Furthermore, we explore how cross-disciplinary dialogue about human behavior can break the third wall of traditional design processes when architects prioritize the human nature of user experience. We believe if designers are in touch with their own unique lens, they are able to recognize their distinct deconstruction of the built environment. This process of self-recognition can radically shift the dialogue of how the public realm is perceived past the notion of correct or inherent design pursuits. A designer (or humans) inherent bias, specifically in this case how it relates to gender, drives not only what is lacking or how it should be resolved, but the success of that resolution as a whole. For the human mind can only interpret a small percentage of the whole story of our environments at a time. It is our goal to introduce a new method of self-reflection to guide our readers to recognize the tints of their personal lenses and see the impact it has on perceiving the qualities of our culture, and one's ability to act authentically.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Meesh is currently at MIT in candidacy for her Master's Degree in City Planning and was recently appointed an LGBTQ+ Commissioner for the City of Cambridge, MA. Her research explores how social identities exist and interact with the built environment, particularly in how to spatialize and map lesser-known histories often found buried in the archives. She dreams of creating public spaces curated by human desire and reflective of the diverse community narratives that once shaped them.

Seantel who has formally trained in and now practices architecture full-time, focuses on unpacking the details of design, intent, and execution. Exploring the historic ways in which design relates to the curation of gender and gender performance, her work aims to imagine a design for a population unconfined by these constructions- a design for population of entirely expansive gender.

HOW DO ARCHITECTURE AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT INFORM OUR IDENTITY?

Architecture and the city are frames in which we see and experience the world. They provide a sense of human scale that we measure ourselves against our known environments and through their direction, we perceive and experience reality. Consider a log cabin or cathedral, with just a minimal understanding of architectural typologies, we are able to feel the depth and echo of long corridors and the phenomena of chill warmth from a stained glass window. The language we use to narrate space has the ability to construct an architecture existing more within the mind, rather than reality.

INTRODUCTION

When discussing the built environment's relationship to our individual identity, the conversation revolves around the classic conundrum of the chicken vs. the egg. There are two parts to this story: the chicken, a development of a place by the designer and the egg, a reality of that construction's effect on its audience. To understand a real thing authentically is not by its identity alone, but in relation to the context of the subject and place. For example, in order to determine the meaning of a word, you must read the complimenting sentence. To know a person, you must become familiar with their environment. In order to truly understand the purpose of a building or place, you must understand the intent of the architect or designer behind it. It is a question of not simply who gains access to curate our environments, but their goals and vision for how the future users will operate in space.

A painting, for instance, symbolizes more than an interpretation of the artist's view of the world as it subconsciously manifests their perception of how the world should be. Similarly, when a designer's trained eye looks at their existing surroundings, it searches for what is missing. Their eye determines the design opportunity to achieve a desired state and fills this void with built forms. Through this lens we begin to understand the weight of inherent bias in design, the desire or prescribed outcome, deeming architecture and the built environment to be the greatest physical symbol of our cultural rulings; a political art.

FINDING MEANING IN DESIGN

As humans, we navigate this world in a quest to find meaning in our personal lives. As we mature and experience place, we naturally resonate with or grow an attachment to certain places more than others. This organic connection varies with each individual or group, often influenced by social identity or subconscious spatial cues. When we build, experience, redesign, and build again we are monumenting the discovery of what might work *better* for us as individuals or groups to assimilate in society. Jean Paul Sartre, a French philosopher and key figure in the development of the philosophy of existentialism and phenomenology, defines this "monumenting" in his book *Being and Nothingness* as "...a way of modifying the shape of the world; arranging a means in view of an end" (Satre, 1943, p. 563). He identifies a common act that we, as humans, do almost naturally and inherently with a bias. Looking at the world through a critical lens, the singular, individual mind analyzes the state of it's environment in relation to the body's personal comfort. To Satre, as one searches to modify their conditions, whether physical or situational, they do so in hopes of achieving improvement. This process of search and discovery is rooted in a personal, unique analysis, therefore making the process of modification inherently biased. Philippe d'Anjou elaborates on this definition by contextualizing it within the mind of a designer. Architectural and urban designers envision a *desired* reality by identifying and fulfilling what they identify as a *lack* in the built environment. For a designer to act on this development or vision presupposes the conception of what is *not*, what can *become*, and what *should* be reality (d'Anjou 2010). However, no "factual" state exists to declare this as truth or a societal norm. The intent itself is actually being derived from a human bias of the designer. As Sartre says, "*this act is a projection of a singular person's consciousness*" (Satre, 1943, p. 563).

Similarly in the built environment, early narratives, maps, and city plans are evidence of narrow, often biased political and social views at the time in which they were developed. The residents in which planners historically sought to include and plan for in the future have in fact, been planned out of their cities from the beginning due to this inherent bias. Today, residents likely without knowledge, reaffirm these biased views and replicate problematic spatial patterns each time they navigate the public realm and architectural forms. As a result, individuals provide a subconscious consent to historic planning efforts and oppressive design that led to the marginalization of certain social identities.

Architectural design and city planning give users the ability to physically place themselves within a culture and setting. Physical designs become both the political and metaphorical symbol of what aspects of culture are to be represented in place. Philosophers like Sartre argue that true freedom exists *outside* of this order from society; that order is our unconscious abiding to a prescribed social performance in order to gain approval and in many cases safety. Our internal discomfort combined with our external performance produces our

public-facing identity within a society. The fundamentals of social identity theory tell us that one is perceived as belonging to a certain group by another based on how that one appears. While never intending to lead to social categorization, the inherent nature of “grouping” is a highly biased, yet heavily utilized, practice in the field of planning. When describing the unique design or vernacular of a place, a social identity or categorization is often assumed.

During the traditional design process, implicit bias is imposed at each phase from which questions are being asked in public participatory processes to the actualization of a design concept. The perception of individuals being planned for is interpreted by planners and then applied to the spatial design. These often-biased assumptions are used to determine which social identities will have access to occupy space and are based on their personal knowledge of how human behavior can generate social and economic capital. Furthermore, the use of common language to explain these design decisions and intention behind the planner’s choices are translated to descriptive statements in response to cultural societal norms at the time. For example, the frequent use of the following words *inclusive, sustainable, diverse, inviting, accessible, etc.* can be seen scattered throughout most plans and design produced in the last decade. The persistent and universal use of these terms in response to what culture deems acceptable has been proven to be detrimental to planned communities. Not to mention there is no formal process for vetting and confirming the nature of success in what planner’s state as truth and subsequently how individuals experience the space. The built environment provides the largest stage to publicly perform our most intimate and social aspects of life, yet the natural and implicit bias we, as designers, use to curate these spaces is all too often overlooked by users and our profession alike.

NARRATING BEYOND DESIGN

The notion of using design to communicate a universal narrative or truth, often derived from dissimilar stories, is a tool utilized in the social construction of the many facets of daily life. Let’s look at this concept through the lens of advertising. Rolan Barthes, a french literary critic, uses soap as a benign and unpolitically charged example when describing the power that advertising has on our perceptions of needs and purpose. In his book *Mythologies* he describes the use of ‘Persil Whiteness’ which bases its value on the evidence of a result; it calls into play vanity, a social concern with appearances, by offering the comparison of two objects, one of which is whiter than the other. Even the unnecessary additive of foam is incorporated into soap because it implies a sense of purpose once activated by water. The once useless gel seemingly explodes before one’s eyes, forcing the user to imagine the wealth of active elements combating one another in the palm of one’s hand (Barthes, 1957). It is in this way, Barthe describes, that through the mythology of soap the barren function of its purpose has been disguised into a delicious image of something fluffy, white, euphoric and

necessary. It is the language behind something as mundane as soap that we understand the power our descriptions and our language have on our perception of everything we not only use, but *experience*.

We are taught as designers that a successful campaign or narrative will be able to curate a desirable user experience followed by the guide of achieving it through the design of “x” product or built form. A popular, contemporary example of this construct is the quality of life Apple products are known to sell to their audience while purchasing a new phone. One can imagine themselves living a fun, free, easy, adventurous life when viewing Apple’s heavily curated advertisements. This strategic practice of using constructed storytelling has become so fine tuned that much of how we understand our needs as users today come from being told by designers what they are in the first place.

There is not one said “time” in which neither designers nor users are explicitly taught who belongs where and for what reasons, yet there are lessons embedded within the subconscious that create these narratives. This phenomena of material symbolism pulls from the theory of semiotics by Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist and one of the founders of semiotics in 1857. He defines the term as “something which stands to somebody for something;” the study of signs (Krampen, 1987). In this way, all signs within a society can be broken down into two parts: the signifier and the signified. Meaning any particular item is both the essence of what it is in addition to how it is understood to be. In design what we have learned from the repetitive converging with the forms that surround us is how the designs begin to symbolize an expected experience within the mind, leaving no opportunity for space to be autonomous. Common materials with heavy social symbolism are mahogany, velvet, white tile, and stained glass. It is not to say the experience of these materials cannot vary from person to person, but architects and planners play a critical role in choosing what typologies are carried throughout shifts in cultural and design.

If we look at the design of our environments through the same lens, we can find new meaning to definitions of familiar terms: there is the building, and then there is the understanding of what that building means to us. In essence, every building communicates something to the culture in which it is built. For example, consider where the mind goes and how it constructs:

a triple-decker home

a skyscraper

a penthouse

FORMING IDENTITY IN A CONSTRUCTED WORLD

How a user identifies with aspects of a building or physical form, such as material, impacts the way we associate people and action with place. Gradually over time, the known social history of human behavior has developed without consideration for the vital role played by public space and the language of individual identity. Today, the critical discourse in the field of planning is interwoven with ethics of race, class, gender, and perceptive 'othering'. Humans are perceived as active curators of their built environment whereby their actions, social relations, presence, and often non-presence are representative of the larger narrative or culture of social constructs and identities within communities. Our environments are merely a construction of social desire; a sentiment that manifests through design. As a result, our divided communities are only becoming further divided, ruled by the conscious and subconscious bias of planners and their interpretation of social need.

Arthur Van Gennep was the first social scientist to observe how these rituals or symbols acquired from monuments in human behavior are universal by nature and only differ when referring to culture. In his work *The Rite of Passage*, Gennep spatializes this concept when stating how a society is similar to a house divided into individual rooms and corridors. He determines that individuals and groups acquire access through privilege and materiality, often starting at the birth of identity or metaphorically in the foundation of one's home. The more society begins to resemble and reflect the needs of its diverse users in its design or built form, the thinner the separating walls become resulting in a more open and inviting floor plan for all. While one cannot simply choose which attributes they possess from birth, over time, through the accumulation of various experiences and exposure to various cultures in society, an individual can begin to shape their perceived social identities and build collective strength in community by shifting our personal narrative, one story at a time.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF STORYTELLING

In the post-WWII era, a shift in social culture in society revitalized the advertising of the architectural profession with the development of a new narrative focused deeply on male and female identity in design. With post-war male joblessness, the number of working-class women was at an all time high and an effort to place women's work back in the individual home became a primary focus of the profession. The systematic collaboration between architect and woman, or housewife, guided by principles of domestic management became the new standard method for developing a social order in the designed world. A theory rendered historically significant when analyzing the gendered designs of influential German architect and founder of the Frankfurt School of Design, Ernst May in 1972.

May's architectural team was internationally recognized for the radical shift in perception of domestic life after developing a new framework for home design in order to produce a "content housewife". The framework identified how the use of color could brighten rooms, material selection of enameled surfaces provided an ease to cleaning, and the purchase of streamlined furniture to eliminate dust would increase the quality of life for women at home (Henderson, 1996). Following its popular adoption, a series of efficient furnishings and equipment were produced to provide women a sense of ease and fulfillment when accomplishing domestic tasks faster. May's intentional use of gender specific architecture, alongside a strategically designed set of vocabulary, advertised a *better, healthier, more happy* way of life for the previous post-war narrative of the *exhausted* women maintaining two jobs. It is important to recognize that the attempt to rationalize these designs was not what sold the historic production of the housewife, but the energy of the language behind the gendered narrative to manipulate women into a socially productive and fulfilling role.

The highly influential nature of May's school of thought is exemplified in George Wagner's 1996 analysis of the "ideal bachelor pad" when he discusses how Playboy curated the contrasting narrative of pure masculinity with the adoption of gender bias in the architectural design of its space. Wagner argues how the standard redesign of homes, including the selection of objects and furnishings within them, was driven with the intent to re-identify the perception of domestic men and women with a new, culturally-prescribed role. Strategic advertising campaigns echoed the power a man would generate from owning space and the ability to attain pure masculinity to publicly identify as the "ideal man." In *The Lair of the Bachelor*, Wagner describes the power of this architectural typology as:

"a way of manipulating geometries that frame a visual field of the subject's view, or it overt demonstrates of the latent forces of control- the governmental, economic, and bureaucratic. It is no secret that architecture is a medium of domination."

ADVERTISING MALE MASCULINITY

The language of the Playboy penthouse's original advertisement, "*a High Handsome Haven for the Bachelor in Town*," holds within itself the power and role of gender identity in architecture at the time. The first paragraph immediately captures the attention of the young, single male by providing a guide, through space, where every one of his prescribed desires could be fulfilled. A once utopic dream of post-WWII male entrepreneurs rendered attainable by architects through the strategic use of narrative. The result: a development of a biased curation of male identity to describe what space one's identity was allowed to take up or safely exist in. Furthermore, the toxic narrative of this "haven for men" was explicitly advertised to meet the desires every *elite* man, publicly naming those uninterested in the

vision as being *losers* or *queer*. Wagner builds on his argument by identifying the types of textures and furnishings used in the design of the bachelor pad. To the reader, these symbols represented the physical components of the elitist male identity, an identity that every man was told to desire and could achieve by improving upon his domicile through design.

The narrative of the bachelor pad was curated to be a space with an overt program for sexual power. Every architectural detail, including the bar's careful positioning, is described to allow for the "perfect psychological moment - no chance of leaving her cozily curled up on the couch with her shoes off and returning to find her mind changed, damn it." A key feature reinforcing the power of gender politics can be seen in the original design of the open floor plan, a standard orientation still used by many of us today. The use of the open floor plan was said to enable one to keep their eyes on everyone in the space at the same time and ensure the dominant male identity remains in the position of power and control. Again, it is important to note how the use of architectural language and verbiage in relation to the visual dominance of this space would allow for the user to become successful and attain pure male masculinity.

PLANNING FOR SPATIAL CONTROL

A sense of ownership and belonging, whether individual or collective, is fundamental in creating a mutually beneficial built environment for all. By applying basic principles of human behavior to design, architects and planners are able to ensure a sense of belonging and adequate access for all identities to occupy space together. Social scientist Dolores Hayden (1997) laid the foundation for this concept in her book 'Power of Place' when explaining how a person's biological response to the surrounding physical environment limits their ability to feel attachment to or comfortable within a space, especially when in distress. In the same sentiment, French sociologist Henry Lefebvre articulates this concept of place attachment as an assertion that physical space can shape the social production of territories or power dynamics. By applying this theory to examine both the limitations and opportunities provided by existing spatial territories, such as the open floor plan, designers can begin to decipher how built forms influence social behavior.

In the case of the Bachelor Pad's open floor plan, the design leverages the privilege of the owner by allowing them to observe others from a position of power, further illustrated by lack of clearly identified spatial territories. As a result, the large continuous space becomes an ideal representation of the overarching definition of male identity and goal of achieving a bachelor's utopic dream. "There are two basic areas within the home, an active zone for fun and partying and a quiet zone for relaxation, sleep and such," both of which are devoid of the "women's aesthetic in which an overwhelming percentage of homes are furnished in." Spaces such as Bachelor Pad can afford a character, a lifestyle, a luxury, and a future connecting

deeply to Barthe's unbinding of our relationship to soap. The success of the bachelor pad is not achieved by the tectonics or production of the space but through the promise it yields to the hopeful bachelor in search for male validation. Rem Koolhaas builds on this concept when describing the symbolic nature of a skyscraper in his book *Delirious New York* as an incubator for (male) adults (Koolhaas, 1994, p. 158). He narrates the progression of identity and influence of the skyscraper's architecture through the eyes of a child navigating space. A growing child is said to be shaped by the different qualities of each floor he climbs, eventually leading to the top floor or penthouse, a symbolic representation of the elite male persona he aspires to be. The design of the skyscraper and access to a motorized elevator, allows one to climb to the top of the social ladder quickly, often a result of privilege, power, and access to capital.

"It permits it's members that are too impatient to await the outcome of evolution to reach a new strata of maturity by transforming themselves into new beings."

In Koolhaas's example, the urban utopia and lifestyle of the bachelor pad or penthouse are seen as spaces where few male elites can acquire unique levels of perfection via their personal dwelling. To detach the culture produced through these designs with the architect and social curation behind them leaves the user to believe it's coming from within. We are all in a constant dialogue with our environments, remembering, learning from, comparing, and contrasting every situation/condition from where we have come from to where we are going. These reactions are constituted by the degree in which we relate to our conditions (d'Anjou, 2010). The level of difficulty we find in situations reveals as much about ourselves as it does about our conditions and is a reflection of social order. Our freedom or personal comfort in any environment is a reaction to what we deem safe or comfortable in relation to what we are taught is allowed.

BODIES EXISTING IN SPACE

If we understand the built environment to be a concoction of social rulings than how are we to say that any individual is free to act authentically in culturally curated conditions? Identity, in this way, is who we are in reaction to our environment and how we fit into it. We now face a difficult relationship within our own bodies and identities. Juhani Pallasmaa brilliantly identifies in his essay *An Architecture of the Seven Senses*, that our culture is drifting towards a distanced, de-sensualization, and de-eroticization of the human relation to reality as we dis-identify with our environments. We are losing touch with our outer skin through the way we impose and identify or un-identify with space (Pallasmaa, 1994).

I am the space, where I am. - Noel Arnaud, 2009.

Friedensreich Hundertwasser, an Australian architect and artist, describes architecture as being one of five skins humans have. The first is the epidermis, followed by clothing, architecture, identity, and finally, our earth. All of these layers have qualities imposed onto them with which we either consciously or unconsciously identify. When we experience a dysphoric relationship with ourselves or our surroundings, it is often the result of subconsciously rejecting that imposed identity. In return, our construction's detachment from the authentic realities of those occupying it results in a bleak, monotonous space, engaging more with sight and physicality and less with the ephemeral sensations of our bodies. By carefully restructuring the mechanisms, standards and language for how we design the built environment, we as designers and curators have the unique ability to create a new representational and inclusive social order; a seemingly just response to the post-WWII era social hierarchy of gender identity.

DEMOLISHING THE THIRD WALL

The stories or "myths" that we teach and learn through the aforementioned embedded lessons as a way of understanding what it means to be a woman or man, a person of color, queer, or any other social identity, are the foundations for systemized production of an implicitly biased and desired society. How can the environment represent a blending of experiences onto a body? It begins with knowing where the design starts, and more importantly, where you start. In breaking down the wall that divides the designer at work from the humanistic experience, we can start to recall why we design in the first place: to create a better world for the people occupying. In this way, the singular utopic vision existing only in the mind of the individual, is generated through bias. There are many ways to define ones calling, purpose, or meaning, but the pursuit of a utopic architectural or planned state comes from the building, experiencing, deconstructing, and building again of one's desired personal identity. For if the overarching goal of design as a whole is to create an equitable, inclusive built environment for all individuals, we must first address our contested narratives and social identities as a result of previous oppressive architecture and planning practices.

REFERENCES

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. New York: Noonday Press, 1972 (1957). 164.

d'Anjou, Philippe. *Beyond duty and virtue in design ethics*. *Design Issues* 26, no. 1, 2010. 97.

Gennep, Arnold. *The rites of passage*. sixth impression. The University of Chicago Press, 1972.

Hayden, Dolores. *The power of place*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995.

Henderson, Susan R. *A Revolution in the woman's sphere*. *Architecture and Feminism*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996. 232.

Koolhaas, Rem. *Definitive instability: the downtown athletic club*. *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*. New York, NY: The Monacelli Press, Inc. ,1994. 158.

Pallasmaa, Juhani. *An architecture of the seven senses*. In *Questions of Perception: Phenomenology of Architecture*, eds. Steven Holl, Juhani Pallasmaa, and Alberto Perez-Gomez. Tokyo: a+u Publishing Co., Ltd./William Stout Publishers, 1994.

Sartre, Jean Paul. *Being and nothingness*. In *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1993.

Wagner, George. *The lair of the bachelor*. *Architecture and Feminism*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996. 194-195.